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## **WAR MONUMENTS AS VEHICLES OF MEMORY AND ACTIVATORS OF SOCIAL ACTIONS**

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# WAR MONUMENTS AS VEHICLES OF MEMORY AND ACTIVATORS OF SOCIAL ACTIONS

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## 1. Introduction

Monuments matter. We may think of them as silent objects and relics of history: As impressive as *The Monument to the Battle of the Nations (Völkerschlachtdenkmal)* in Leipzig may seem for instance, all in all, we believe it to be mute and harmless. However, this belief in the *innocence* of monuments is no longer supportable. Let's invoke two examples: firstly, a Soviet monument in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, secondly, the monument of the Confederate General Robert E. Lee in Virginia, USA.

The so-called Bronze Soldier, named in 1947 as *Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn*, has been standing in the centre of Tallinn for decades. For the Russian minority in Estonia, it commemorated the Great Patriotic War against the Nazis and the sacrifice of Red Army soldiers. For Estonians, on the other hand, it was a vivid symbol of Soviet oppression and protracted occupation. Even after Estonia gained independence in 1990, the Russian community in Tallinn would continue to celebrate Victory Day at the site of the Bronze Soldier. In 2007, a decision was made to move the statue to the military cemetery. This decision caused two days of riots, which were started by the Russian minority.

Ten years later, in August 2017, even more serious incidents occurred in the American city of Charlottesville, Virginia. A rally was ignited when the local authorities set forth plans to remove the equestrian statue of General Lee from the local park. This famous general was a commander of the Confederate State Army during the American Civil War. Despite his ambiguous attitude to the issue of slavery, he still represents what were identified as the ideals of the South: Secession from the Union and sustaining slavery. This decision to remove the monument was opposed by nationalists and right-wing activists, including neo-fascists, who in turn were opposed by left-wing activ-

ists and members of the Black Lives Matter movement, among others. The clash took a violent turn: many people got injured and one person died after a car was rammed at crowds. As a consequence, the governor of the state of Virginia declared a state of emergency in the city. The case of the Bronze Soldier and the rally in Charlottesville showcase the potentially inflammatory nature of monuments. Some monuments, however, including war memorials, cause a variety of other reactions which do not necessarily generate conflict, but rather integration.

Monuments devoted to victims, soldiers, commanders, triumphs, and losses have become an important element in the inventory of our civilization. They have been permanently present since antiquity, taking on various forms in the landscape that surround us. All over the world, we can encounter war relics of different statuses: memorial sites, historic monuments, and tourist attractions. They are located in town centres or pop up unexpectedly off the beaten track. Objects of these kind are both the aftermath of historical events and a consequence of the way we treat commemorative practices. Recently, their number and variety have risen drastically.

The ways and practices of commemoration have changed; besides traditional kinds of monuments, new, alternative forms have appeared. Today we speak not only of monuments, but also anti-monuments, counter-monuments, alternative monuments, or, as Krzysztof Wodiczko posits in his radical programme of war deconstruction: “un-war monuments.”<sup>1</sup> Many monuments have become such permanent landmarks that they are not noticed anymore. Those monuments remain dormant, relegated to the role of a historical curio, perhaps forever or perhaps just for the time being. Others raise disagreements, resulting in their being knocked down, maimed, or relocated. In other words, war monuments are focal points of social activity; they can both generate conflicts and fulfil a momentous bond-forming role. They are an element of historical memory management, an ideological tool and means to pay homage, express regret, respect, and gratitude. However, as emphasized by Siobhan Kattago, their true nature lies in the rationalization processes. War memorials are cultural symbols reflecting the human instinct for aggression towards one another. While they may have many different interpretations, all war memorials are attempts to make sense of the senseless: violent death at the hands of others. Death is not commemorated due to natural catastrophe or illness, but due to war.<sup>2</sup>

The war monument is an ambivalent and multifaceted phenomenon; the study *War Monuments: Forms, Places, Memory* was devoted to it. Taking place from 2013 to 2015, it spanned several European countries. The study adopted a provisionally wide definition of war monuments including sculptures, buildings, cemeteries, military equipment placed on pedestals, memorial plaques, and remembrance parks. In view of this, we can consider war monuments

as spatial constructions placed in public spaces, aimed at commemorating persons or militarily significant events for the given community to create historic memory.<sup>3</sup>

Later in the text, I will analyse the case of war memorials in Hamburg, which aptly illustrate the feuds and controversies monuments can cause. I will then continue to present more general conclusions pertaining to the subject of war memorials and potential ways their form and function could change. In the last part of the text, I shall scrutinize the concept of tearing down war monuments and the necessity of reformulating thinking about war and memory.

## 2. Hamburg: “Even if We Have to Die. . .”

Hamburg is abundant in war monuments. The one that stands out on account of its bulk is the centrally-located memorial devoted to the 76th Hansa Infantry Regiment soldiers, fallen during the Franco-Prussian War and the First World War. Designed by Richard Kuöhl, it was unveiled in 1936. Kuöhl was the author of many war monuments during the Third Reich era; an equally massive example was erected in 1939 in Düsseldorf, in memory of the 39th Infantry Regiment soldiers. In both works Kuöhl utilizes the bas-relief form, depicting multiplied soldier silhouettes.



Ernst Barlach's memorial, Hamburg, photo by T. Ferenc.

Five years before unveiling Kuöhl's sculpture in Hamburg, in the main square, in front of the city hall, stood a pylon with a relief by Ernst Barlach, showing a mother with a child. The inscription read "40 thousand sons of the city gave their lives for you. 1914–1918." Barlach's memorial was thus of a mourning character; it commemorated loss. Barlach, a First World War veteran, was a committed pacifist, a fact that later turned out to be the source of his troubles.

After the Nazis came to power, Barlach was deemed one of the "degenerate artists," which meant a ban from practicing art and a confiscation of many of his works. The fascists were of the opinion that the mourning pylon failed to honour fallen soldiers properly, in line with nationalist spirit and panache. It didn't inspire any military effort, nor did it honour death for the country, leader, and nation. In 1934, a contest for a new monument was an-

nounced, with the provision that the contestants could be only German and Aryan sculptors and architects.<sup>4</sup> The inscription placed on the winning monument, above the marching soldiers, was a patriotic and mortuary declaration, “*Deutschland muss leben, auch wenn wir sterben müssen*”—Germany has to live, even if we have to die (J. Meyer). Today these words can be read as an ominous premonition of the cataclysm which was soon about to be unleashed.

*Kriegerdenkmal*, the soldiers’ memorial, was ceremoniously unveiled on March 15th, 1936, accompanied with a military parade. In 1939, right before the outbreak of the Second World War, Adolf Hitler said in his speech in front of the Reichstag, “Just as I myself am ready at any time to stake my life—anyone can take it for my people and for Germany—so I ask the same of all others.”<sup>5</sup> In this speech, Hitler clearly expressed a wish to start a war that would engage the entire society and require utmost sacrifice, which would either lead to a total victory or doom. Saying, “It is of no importance if we ourselves live—as long as our Volk lives, as long as Germany lives,”<sup>6</sup> he exposed what Erich Fromm diagnosed as clinical case of necrophilia.<sup>7</sup> Assuming such a perspective, we can interpret the Hamburg monument as a materialised form of this clinical case. When only the life of the nation matters, the existence of a single individual ceases to be of any importance.



*Kriegerdenkmal, Hamburg, photo by Marek Domański.*

After 1945, there were some demands to pull down the monument which, according to its opponents, glorified German militarism. In spite of these discussions, city officials decided to leave it where it stood, as a relic of history. What's more, in 1956 a plaque was added, honouring Hamburg soldiers from the Second World War, thus turning it into a commemorative memorial.<sup>8</sup> However, discussions about whether it glorified war or commemorated the fallen continued. Therefore, in 1982, the authorities announced a contest for a counter-memorial (*Gegendenkmal*) that would neutralise and counteract the militarist and heroic block. The idea wasn't to destroy or move the monument, but rather to create a new spatial situation, redefining its original context.

The winning design was co-authored by Ulrich Böhme and Wulf Schneider. Their idea was to circle the memorial with silhouettes of soldiers, placed in rows, gradually sinking more and more into the ground, until they disappear into their symbolic tombs.<sup>9</sup> The project focused on showing the death of the soldiers, rather than their heroism and devotion to the country. It wasn't so much a counter-monument but rather a contemporary transformation of its initial concept, supposed to lead to a profound change in the monument's meaning.

Eventually, the choice of the authorities fell on another design by a well-known Austrian sculptor Alfred Hrdlicka, the author of the famous Vienna monument against war and fascism. The cumulated energy of the 1936 monument was counteracted by a spatial, layered construction consisting of several elements. Originally it was supposed to comprise four fragments, but the budget allowed only two. The first fragment referred to the Allied forces' carpet-bombing of Hamburg in 1943, which was conducted as a part of the Gomorrah operation. This is how W. G. Sebald describes the so-called firestorm that consumed Hamburg:

At 1:20 AM a firestorm arose of an intensity that no one would ever before have thought possible. Reaching more than a mile into the sky, it snatched oxygen to itself so violently that the air currents reached hurricane force. [. . .] At its height, the storm lifted gables and roofs from buildings, flung rafters and entire advertising kiosks through the air, tore trees from the ground and drove human beings before it like living torches.<sup>10</sup>

Further on in Sebald's text, the description of the consequences of air raids becomes very graphic. A silhouette of a man in agony in Hrdlicka's cast iron wall symbolizes thousands of people who died in the raids; above it hovers rafters flung into the air by the sheer force of the attack. The second part of the monument concerned the tragic history of the ship *Cap Arcona*, full of Neuengamme concentration camp prisoners. On May 3rd, 1945, the ship was bombard-

ed by British planes. As a result of this attack only 2400 survived out of 9400 prisoners.<sup>11</sup> Hrdlicka shows the tragedy of the prisoners in one of the separate elements of this monument, entitled *Untergang von KZ-Häftlinge* (The Death of Concentration Camp Prisoners).



Fragment of Alfred Hrdlicka's sculpture, Hamburg, photo by Marek Domański.

One of the final initiatives to transform the *Kriegerdenkmal* monument was replacing it with a memorial to thirty thousand German soldiers sentenced to death for anti-war agitation or desertion during the Second World War.<sup>12</sup> In today's Germany, there are more than thirty memorials of that kind. However, they are usually modest and placed in inconspicuous places. Instead of this replacement, in 2015, a new counter-monument was located between Alfred Hrdlicka's sculptures and Richard Kuöhl's 76th Hansa Infantry Regiment monument. It was designed by Volker Lang and was devoted to *Deserters and Other Victims of the Nazi Military Judiciary*.<sup>13</sup> Today, within a relatively small setting, three different monuments coexist. Each of them belongs to a different epoch and represents distinct ideas of commemoration. Still, for now, the *Kriegerdenkmal* stays on, immovable, dwarfing the Dammtordamm area. The act of covering the inscription "*Deutschland muss leben, auch wenn wir sterben müssen*" by the Friedensaktivisten pacifist group in May 2011, proves that the debates surrounding the mon-

ument will periodically resurface. Its dormancy is thus only apparent and from time to time some actions against the monument are undertaken. Perhaps its status as a symbolic “relic” only masks hidden conflicts and the on-going German discourse on memory.

### 3. Monuments, Memorials, and Anti-Monuments

Each spatial realization, however simple, is the consequence of a number of social, political, artistic, and last but not least, economic decisions. War monuments straddle numerous sensitive boundaries that can unite and divide; strengthening social bonds, they can also generate conflicts. They give the illusion of stability in a world of symbols and values that make us feel rooted in reality and history. A memorial focuses one’s attention to what’s important, worth remembering and worshipping. Erecting a monument has numerous psychosocial consequences as does its destruction or relocation. The scale of action and emotion concurrent to all these activities is amazingly rich. The main function of memorials, connected to the Latin etymology of the word *memorialis*, is to serve as a reminder.<sup>14</sup> Form of state or structure serves to commemorate and inspire reflection but also shapes specific attitudes and imagination. Memorials are the result of negotiating or imposing a certain understanding of historical events, but also an attempt at legitimizing a certain vision of history. We may think of them as the material artefacts that arise from these processes of establishing collective memory. Tracing biographies of monuments suggests that in spite of their apparent transparency they can cause a number of reactions, stemming from various visions and interpretations of the past.

War memorials have been a part and parcel of our civilization since ancient times, emerging with the advent of the Greek *polis* and the Roman Empire. Initially, its paramount function was to celebrate victory, triumph of the leader and his army. However, the history of war monuments is first and foremost connected to the period of the birth of modern nations and the era of total wars that engage masses of soldiers and civilians. This process begun with the French Revolution and the transfer of memorials from sacral facilities into open public spaces. A war monument became thus a part of the public landscape. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the idea of the tomb of an Unknown Soldier was born. As Siobhan Kattago noted, the life of an individual, the fate of the nation, and the survival of the state became symbolically fused.<sup>15</sup> It is worth pondering what purpose this myth of sacrifice and war experience serves, as well as how it is utilized and by whom.

Historical politics takes on many forms and memorials are one of the most spectacular ways it manifests. War memorials are often situated on battlefields, especially the most historically significant and bloody ones, as is the case with Napoleonic battles or memorial cemeteries



from the First and Second World War. However, it's just one of the possible reasons for their placement. Very often they are located in city centres, the hub of social life, where they can easily become objects of cult, as evidenced by the tombs of an Unknown Soldier. Though the politics of memory is always key in the placement of memorials, the decision to place them in city centres is governed by a different logic than that which justifies their presence on former battlefields.

The construction of memorials is usually a consequence of collective action. However, the initiative force can be traced. Often the initiative comes directly from state authorities and is an element of historical policy representing a specific ideological programme. This was the case with the Soviet monuments erected along the war trail of the Red Army. Completely different cases are memorials erected as a consequence of bottom-up efforts of local patriots and history aficionados. We can thus look for the genesis of monuments as arising from different levels of state authority, but we can also point to civic initiatives. The same could be said about the destruction and relocation of monuments. These different approaches to relocation is aptly illustrated in the story of the Bronze Soldier statue in Tallinn, cited at the beginning of this article, but also in the actions undertaken “against” the analysed Hamburg memorial. Their fates reflect unceasing disagreements on historic interpretation. The former was removed from the city centre and relocated to a military cemetery; the latter remains at its original site, but is confronted with a counter-memorial, whose persuasive effect remains debatable. These monuments, epitomes of their respective epochs though they might be (the first one to communism and Soviet occupation of Estonia, the second to German militarism and national socialism), still evoke strong emotions and attest to the on-going workings of memory and (non)memory. Controversies raised by memorials are a testament to their symbolic power.

The interpretation of memorials changes with time. W. T. J. Mitchell, writing about images (including monuments) that offend, invokes *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*: “De-nounced as an anti-war counter-monument that demeaned the memory of the heroism of American soldiers, with time it underwent an extraordinary change, becoming one of the most venerated monuments in the USA.”<sup>16</sup> As an initiative of The Vietnam Veterans Memorials Found, it heralded a new era for (anti-)monuments parting with monumental figurativeness and seeking new, alternative ways of commemoration. Creators of anti-monuments focus on loss rather than heroism, invoking the memory of victims rather than victors. Rather than legitimise death in the name of the nation and country, they point out the cruelties of war.

The essence of anti-monuments is the very act of commemorating, which can take up almost any form, sometimes most unexpected. Some of these creations are outstanding works of art; *The Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial* in Vienna by Rachel Whiteread for instance seems

singularly precious. Still, it is not always the creator who makes the final decision in regard to the erection of the monument. Even winning an open contest does not guarantee its realisation, as evidenced by the withdrawal from Ulrich Böhme and Wulf Schneider's proposal to redefine the soldiers' memorial in Hamburg. The actions of groups initiating the creation, modification, and removal of monuments are always strictly tied to the processes of collective memory transformation. Monuments, thus understood, become a kind of memory prosthesis, frozen in the different material forms.

#### 4. Destruction of a War Memorial

The monuments I have mentioned, as well as many others, continue to retain huge persuasive powers. Strings of pilgrims flocking to see them clearly show their magnetic ability to attract attention and inspire unending admiration. Irrespective of their interpretation (memorials of peace, reconciliation, death, etc.), they usually honour the toil of the soldier and glorify war. Krzysztof Wodiczko, in his book *The Abolition of War*, argues that it is necessary to disarm culture, a task which to a large extent falls to the artist. He considers war monuments especially dangerous; not only do they perpetuate war; they “cement the concepts of national, regional, religious, and ethnic identity.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, they petrify divisions, prejudice, and the conviction that wars are necessary and inevitable. In his project *The World Institute for the Abolition of War*, the artist Wodiczko focuses on the Parisian Arc de Triomphe and a programme of actions that would deconstruct the military significance of such objects.

The Arc de Triomphe is a kind of matrix, perpetuating an entire system of beliefs, convictions and myths, a machine of oblivion, which deletes data about real war losses. [. . .] If people knew how many victims were really killed in each of the Napoleonic battles, how many families were mutilated, how much destruction throughout the entire generations was caused by secondary trauma, perhaps they would view such memorials differently. [. . .] Reworking existing monuments, adding a critical, deconstructive element, would be an excellent act for the disarming of culture.<sup>18</sup>

Supplementary reworkings could appear next to many war monuments. Wodiczko posits transforming these objects into monuments of “un-war,” which then could be actively used in unmasking their original, propaganda functions. The monuments would acquire new meanings to serve a different cause—creating culture without wars. The effectiveness of such trans-

formation remains an open question. Nevertheless, it might be one aspect of a diverse and longitudinal strategy leading to an “un-war” culture.

The transformation of war monuments surely will not be enough to create culture free from military conflicts. In fact, war monuments are only material manifestations of deeply rooted cultural patterns. The Italian writer Alessandro Baricco, who underwent a contemporary interpretation of Homer’s heroic epic, *The Iliad*, convincingly described this problem. According to the author, the epic is nothing but a huge war memorial.<sup>19</sup> As such, its protagonists, the warriors, are beautiful, athletic, and powerful. Their weapons and armours are veritable works of art; their movements—a deadly choreography of the highest precision and efficiency; the animals and surroundings are also beautiful. We know very well this type of beauty; war memorials and other works of visual culture have been celebrating it for centuries, and it still has a huge impact, just like Homeric stanzas. Baricco points to this dangerous, millennia-long fascination with war, which hasn’t been quenched even by the two most recent world wars. And, even if for most people the possibility of taking part in military conflicts seems very remote and unimaginable, war is still very much present culturally. The constant presence of war in the culture has been based on a complex ethical and aesthetic syndrome. First revealed with great force in Homer’s epic, “The *Iliad* describes this system of thought and this mode of feeling, concentrating it under a synthetic and perfect sign: beauty.”<sup>20</sup> This beauty and this promise of individual completion that a battle gives cannot be naively negated, according to the writer. War is hell—writes Baricco—but a beautiful one.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the aim of pacifism shouldn’t be to demonize war, which is an obvious evil, but to systematically create a different kind of beauty, devoid of violence and viciousness. Only this way, he concludes, can we prevent Achilles from his inevitable death and help him get home safely. Achilles, this warrior extraordinary, says, “Nothing, for me, is worth [taking] life.”<sup>22</sup> To Baricco, these words are a glimpse of a new civilisation without war and violence, which the Greeks could not yet achieve, but had the intuition of. A culture, which with a huge, collective effort could one day come true. What should we do to disarm the culture of war once and for all? One possibility is the deconstruction of such war monuments which glorify militarism and justify the causing and suffering of death. Newly emerging concepts of war monuments reflect these changes, not only in the context of the very idea of the monument, but also in the realm of historical memory.

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1 Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Obalenie wojen (The Abolition of War)*, trans. Łopatka Paweł, (Krakow: Muzeum Sztuki Współczesnej, 2012), 23.

2 Siobhan Kattago, “Monumenty wojenne i polityka pamięci: Radziecki pomnik wojenny w Tallinie” in *Pomniki wojenne: Formy, miejsca, pamięć*, ed. Tomasz Ferenc and Marek Domański (Łódź: Academy of Fine Arts, 2015), 180; In

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- 4 Mark R. Hatlie, "World War One Memorial and Counter-Memorial at Dammtor in Hamburg," *Sites of memory: Historical Markers, Memorials, Monuments, and Cemeteries*, accessed October 27, 2015, <http://www.sites-of-memory.de/main/hamburgdammtor.html>.
- 5 Adolf Hitler, "Od godziny 5.45 odpowiadamy ogniem" in *Wielkie mowy historii: Tom 3. Od Hitlera do Eisenhowera*, ed. Tadeusz Zawadzki (Warsaw: Polityka, 2006), 73, quote trans. by the author.
- 6 Adolf Hitler, "Od godziny 5.45 odpowiadamy ogniem" in *Wielkie mowy historii: Tom 3. Od Hitlera do Eisenhowera*, ed. Tadeusz Zawadzki (Warsaw: Polityka, 2006), 73, quote trans. by the author.
- 7 Erich Fromm, *Anatomia ludzkiej destrukcyjności*, trans. Jan Karłowski (Warsaw: Rebis, 1998), 416.
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- 10 W. G. Sebald, "A Natural History of Destruction," *New Yorker*, November 4, 2002, 70 (accessed November 30, 2017), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/11/04/a-natural-history-of-destruction>.
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- 16 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Czego chcę od nas obrazy? Pragnienia przedstawień, życie i miłość obrazów*, trans. Zaremba Łukasz (Warsaw: Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2013), 158.
- 17 Jakub Majmurek, "Sztuki wizualne: Wodiczko; Dziecko z grobu nieznanego żołnierza jest w każdym z nas," *Krytyka polityczna*, November 10, 2013 (accessed August 15, 2015), <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/artykuly/sztuki-wizualne/20131110/wodiczko-dziecko-z-grob-u-nieznanego-zolnierza-jest-w-kazdym-z-nas>.
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- 20 *Ibid.*, 156–157, emphasis in the original.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 157.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 154.